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### Authorship of the Ghost

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# **AUTHORSHIP OF THE GHOST**

**Nathan Tinning**

I am interested in art that I do not understand. Rooted in a desire to resolve mystery, I have almost systematically approached artists and ideas that are not presented as pedagogical units, but rather as distorted fragments of truth. My gravitation towards that which dodges understanding lead me to the work of a number of artists, some of whose names appear throughout this document. Rather than looking for a specific narrative or meaning created by an artist, I view artwork within a broader conceptual framework. Rather than trying to understand meaning on the level of metaphor, symbol, or sign, I willfully accept a level of uncertainty in regards to meaning in the work. I apply a similar uncertainty to the production of my art. This allows me to maintain the sense of mystery that initially attracted me to art. By allowing mystery to elude resolve, I keep an interest in art and therefore I engage in a deeper exploration of what is now in front of me rather than moving on to a new topic of research. As I build a theoretical approach to interacting with art, I leave some questions of meaning unanswered.

The approach to understanding art that follows is heavily influenced by the writings of Nicolas Bourriaud. In his book Relational Aesthetics, Bourriaud offers a critical framework for approaching and understanding artwork created since the 1980's. What I value most in Bourriaud's writings is his work at delineating between the aesthetic language established in the arc of modernism and the aesthetic language used by some artists today. Bourriaud describes relational art as "an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic

space.”<sup>1</sup> He essentially identifies the aesthetics of modernism with a focus on the individual. In contrast he identifies “relational art” as a focus on the relationship between or amongst people. By focusing on relationships rather than individuals, relational art demands a different aesthetic and theoretical approach to understanding and developing meaning. Bourriaud goes on to explain relational art as a process in which “someone shows something to someone who returns it as he sees it.”<sup>2</sup> By rearranging some language from Bourriaud’s statement, modernism’s process can be explained as someone showing something to someone who receives it. This distinction highlights the role of the audience in relational art. The “someone who returns it as he sees it” is essentially bringing meaning to the work on the same level as the “someone who shows something”. In contrast, the audience of modernism is a receiver of meaning rather than an active participant in the creation of meaning. This explanation of relational art emphasizes artist and audience as parts of a relationship that is established through the “showing of something”- the creation and exhibition of an artwork.

As an artist, I have no desire to create work that takes on a pedagogical role. I think of my work as a series of questions without wrong answers, directed at both an audience and myself. My approach to art making is the result of a personal desire to not assume a position of privileged knowledge as an artist. Instead, I attempt to build into the work a genuine invitation to participate in the creation of meaning. My actions as an artist, including this invitation, add up to what I consider to be an

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (n.p.: Les Presses du Reel, 2002), 14.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 23.

address of authorship- the linking concept in my practice. In this context, I consider authorship to be the origin of meaning within a piece of artwork. I can identify three different formal approaches within my artwork that function as methods for addressing authorship: appropriation, symbol, and utility. In this essay, I am retroactively identifying authorship, appropriation, collaboration, symbol, and utility as guidelines for understanding my work. The ideas contained in this document are not permanent and definitive attributes in my work, but instead reflections of my own personal understanding of the work at this point in time. That is to say, this document would potentially exist as a completely different set of ideas if written next month, next year, or 5 years from now. Throughout this essay, I will address the idea of authorship as a result of relationships. While my reading of authorship is influenced by Bourriaud's descriptions of relational art, I do not consider myself to be a "relational artist" nor do I categorize my work as "social practice". I do consider my approach to authorship and meaning to be a synthesis of the ideas articulated by Bourriaud. In each of the following sections, I address authorship through the identification of formal patterns within my work. Each of these formal patterns can be read as slightly more concrete examples of "someone showing something to someone who returns it as he sees it."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (n.p.: Les Presses du Reel, 2002), 23.

# UTILITY

In the context of authorship, utility is expressed in my work through the presentation or image of manufactured objects of use. Utility, as expressed in regards to my work refers to objects or materials with a designed utility other than the conveyance of meaning as used in the creation of art images. This is to say that utility, as expressed in this essay refers to utility outside of the realm of art. I deliver the objects or images in ways that allow them to exist as representations of themselves whether or not they are found objects or reproductions. Utility, as used with art-objects, can develop authorship in relation to design and manufacture, use, and appropriation. Authorship is not necessarily exclusive to one of these relationships, excluding the others. Authorship can be developed in all, or any combination of these points of entry.

“Trailer Queen” is primarily composed of a found lawnmower, customized in appearance and use. (Figure 1) The customization of the lawnmower elicits a sense of authorship in the in the decisions made regarding color and modification. The presentation of the customized lawnmower also suggests authorship in the potential use of the machine, while the appropriation of the lawnmower as a found object points to the initial authorship in the manufacture of the machine. This decentralization of authorship is the effect that I am most interested in fostering through utility.

Gabriel Orozco’s “La DS” is an example of another contemporary artist’s with similar forces of authorship at play.<sup>4</sup> Composed of a modified Citroen DS automobile, “La DS” invites authorship from three different potential relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> Carmen Boullosa and Gabriel Orozco, “Gabriel Orozco,” *BOMB* no. 98 (Winter 2007): 66-73, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40427387> (accessed April 14, 2012).

The initial design of the automobile is still perceptible from two sides of “La DS”.

From any other point of view, Orozco’s subtractive modifications are apparent. The car as presented also speaks to the utility of the automobile as initially designed and as re-designed by the artist. This approach to developing multiple layers of authorship within a single work of art does more than to confuse the origin or place of meaning. This pluralistic development of authorship through utility allows for meaning in a work of art to arise from a series of relationships. By this, I mean that a work of art with multiple entry points for interpretation has the ability to link individuals together based on their own experience with the information presented.

– Do you know this object of utility based on its initial manufacture? Do you know this object of utility based on its intended use? Do you know this object of utility based on the changes enacted upon it by the artist?



# **APPROPRIATION**

Appropriation in my work is the result of opening up as much of the world as possible for my use by treating objects and ideas in the same manner as material. In my work, I choose material with careful consideration of what information that material brings to the piece of artwork, and also in regards to process. By carefully choosing a material, I hope to find an overlap between the content of the material and the accessibility of that material. By opening up the idea of material to include objects, ideas from culture, and ideas from other artists specifically, I intentionally expand my options as an artist. The more material available to me in my studio practice, the greater the chance that I will find new approaches to addressing the world around me. As a result, my questioning can include the concerns of a greater audience. Through appropriation, authorship is expanded to include the action of industry, culture beyond art, and the ideas of other artists.

In the “Giving the Ghost” exhibition there is a repeated use of the triangle or pyramid form in the work of both Will Hutchinson and myself. The development of this pattern appears in both collaborative and individual works. “Entertainment Center”, “This is a Pyramid”, and “Good Delivery” all feature the pyramid or triangle as a central formal element. (Figures 2-4) These works grew out of a form of appropriation between Will and I. Each of us, in turn, appropriated the formal element from the other and recreated them in a new and distinct work of art. This created a sense of authorship that vibrates between each of our individual voices, from one piece to another. This appropriation occurred as the result of a close working relationship between us as artists, but in effect opened up both of our

approaches to art making as material for continued creation in the hands of the other.

Appropriation also occurs within my work in the form of the found object. The found object features prevalently in “Giving the Ghost”. “Entertainment Center”, “This Is Also My Hand”, and “Push Pull” all highlight the found object as a prominent address of authorship. (Figures 2, 5,6) The use of the found object within these pieces is dependent on those objects maintaining some relationship to their original use or position before being incorporated into my work.

For example, the stickers that form “Push Pull” are essentially presented as designed- as decals applied to a flat surface. By using these decals as designed, I establish a space of familiarity for the audience. By presenting this almost ubiquitous signage, my authorship is essentially connected to the authorship of the objects, and the authorship of the audience. The authorship of the audience enters the work as a result of their relationship with the stickers- through their recognition of the stickers as a part of their life experienced outside of the art gallery. My own authorship is applied to the decals through repetitive use and illogical placement. The fact that the stickers are applied directly to a non-moving wall instead of a set of doors denies the expected function of the information inherent to the stickers. As a result, I bring the authorship of the design of those stickers in conversation with my own set of ideas and intent.

I consider the use of found object as appropriation exemplified in “Push Pull” to be in conversation with the readymade work of Marcel Duchamp. In “Fountain”,

Duchamp presents a found urinal altered only with a signature.<sup>5</sup> With minimal alteration, the object maintains the associations and use of that object. The reorientation and presentation of the object by Duchamp places his authorship alongside that of the objects design and use rather than eliminating those sources of meaning. Duchamp's modest alteration of the urinal opens up space for meaning to be applied by the audience. In the case of "Fountain", meaning and authorship has been established and re-establish over the past century. For example, Bruce Metcalf uses "Fountain" to argue for a distinction between art and craft while Jerry Saltz describes the work as a "scatological golden calf".<sup>67</sup> These readings of "Fountain" are just two amongst many since the creation of the piece, neither holding a greater sense of authority or authorship over the other. It is this open interpretation that works to expand and decentralize authorship within the piece. While "Fountain" was created within a distinctly different time than my own work, it can act as a precedent for my own use of the found object in relationship to authorship.

In "The Real is Real" appropriation occurs in two different uses, executed in tandem to create the piece. (Figure 7) Formally composed of cut vinyl text applied to the wall, "The Real is Real" appropriates the visual language of gallery signage in the context of the exhibition. By taking the place of the show title or artist's names on the wall of the gallery, the phrase "the real is real" adopts the expected function of wall text to provide information or title to the exhibition. Normally, this wall text

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<sup>5</sup> Pollack, Barbara. 2000. "Fountain's heights." *Artnews* 99, no. 1: 90. *OmniFile Full Text Mega (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 13, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Metcalf, Bruce. 2000. "The problem of the Fountain." *Metalsmith* 20, no. 3: 28-35. *OmniFile Full Text Mega (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 13, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Jerry Saltz, "Idol Thoughts Duchamps Divine Urinal," *Modern Painters* (March 2006): 38-39,

would exist as a statement of authorship on behalf of the exhibiting artists, by giving title to the show. In this case, the text reads “the real is real” hereby offering a suggestion open to interpretation. “The Real is Real” is also an appropriation of a phrase as text. While the phrase does not present itself as a quote, the title and text of the piece is taken from conversation with another artist not included in the exhibition. This use of “found text” presented in physical form creates an instance of transferring words themselves into material used as a found object. This has the effect of including conversation, ideas, and the voice of others as material for appropriation.

“ACTS/KKDETHZ” by Sterling Ruby presents a similar instance of the use of appropriation within the gallery.<sup>8</sup> In “ACTS/KKDETHZ”, Ruby has constructed two unoccupied plinth-like structures. These plinths are empty of any accompanying sculptures, but instead are covered in graffiti-like markings. Ruby presents the furniture of the gallery as a source of material for appropriation. By presenting familiar three-dimensional geometric forms, Ruby includes the authorship or associations of the gallery space alongside his own authorship in the form of vandalism. Here, similar to “The Real is Real”, authorship is a confluence of the appropriation of the visual language of graffiti, the visual language of the gallery space itself, and the authorship of the artist.

In “This Is My Hand” and “This Is a Pyramid” the physical materials used for construction are the active elements linking appropriation to authorship. In both of

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<sup>8</sup> Ribas, João. 2010. “Sterling Ruby: Sincerely Hostile.” *Flash Art (International Edition)* 43, 80-84. *OmniFile Full Text Mega (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 13, 2012).

these pieces, the physicality, use, and tactile familiarity of the materials that I use carry associations outside of those instilled in the works by my process as an artist. While chosen for these associations, the materiality of either of these pieces is a dominant factor in the suggested sense of meaning.

“This is My Hand” (Figure 8) is extruded from terracotta clay. The dimensions of the letters combined with handling of the material strongly references the red brick used in the construction of homes or other buildings. Here, ceramic is presented both as a material for artistic production and as a material of industry. By referencing ceramic brick as a material of industry, each letter of the words spelled by “This is My Hand” is emphasized as a unit or part of a system of construction. While the letters themselves are made as art objects, the process and handling of the material appropriates the methods, ideas, and uses of ceramic brick outside of the art studio.

“This is a Pyramid” (Figure 3) is constructed from Styrofoam sheet insulation. Here, the material also references use of the material in the construction of homes or other buildings. By building a structure large enough to be inhabited, I intentionally left space for the voice of the material to come into play as part of the piece. By appropriating the use of the Styrofoam as a building material, the language and potential familiarity of the Styrofoam is included in the work. Once again, material exists as a form of appropriation intentionally introducing a pluralistic sense of authorship to the work.

In the work of Jessica Jackson Hutchins, a similar approach to material is often employed. In “Convivium” Jackson Hutchins includes several elements

constructed from ceramic.<sup>9</sup> The crudely constructed ceramic vessel forms carry the authorship of Jackson Hutchins, but they are included in “Convivium” as elements within a greater composition. This use of the ceramic vessels creates a strong sense of the materiality of the vessels with a lesser or separate sense of authorship in the actual manipulation of form within the vessels. Jackson Hutchins is essentially appropriating the use of ceramic as an artistic medium within her art. Here, Jackson Hutchins appropriates ceramic in a manner that speaks to the approach of numerous other artists, executing this approach within her art. In “Convivium” Jackson Hutchins appropriates the material of ceramic in the sense that she directly references a specific use of the material, and as a result she includes in authorship outside of her own in “Convivium”.

As demonstrated, appropriation is used within my artwork in a variety of ways both formal and conceptual. Whether appropriation appears through the use of specific material, the ideas of others, or found objects, it is accessed with an intent to create a pluralistic and inclusive sense of authorship. For me, the content inherent to the act of appropriation is that of authorship. By linking multiple voices within an individual work of art, appropriation provides a communal playground within the artwork. This communal intellectual space allows authorship to be included in the work as a pre-existing notion, a notion established in the making of the work, and a notion established in the viewing of the work by linking the

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond, Camela. 2009. "Jessica Jackson Hutchins." *Modern Painters* 21, no. 1: 32-33. *OmniFile Full Text Mega* (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost (accessed April 13, 2012).

audience's familiarity of elements within the artwork to the actions taken up through my own artistic process.



# **SYMBOL**

Like authorship, symbol is an almost inherent element in most works of art. Symbols hold a strong presence in my most recent work. Like the materials and objects used throughout my work, symbols are implemented as directives, or arrows pointing to an idea more encompassing than the information included in the symbol itself. My use of symbol is carried out through the use of very basic and recognizable things or shapes. I deliver symbols in my artwork as symbols themselves, or as objects and images that are intended to address their existence as symbols rather than the “other” that they may be symbols of. This has the effect of using symbols to address authorship in an encompassing manner, including the cultural authorship of symbols alongside my own. I know that the word “symbol” has a presence in many other fields of study outside of art, but my use of symbol is limited to ideas and definitions used within art, for as much as that can be possible. I refer to symbol as a thing, mark, shape, or sign that stands in for an idea more abstract than itself. More specifically, the “idea more abstract than itself” is the idea of a symbol. By dealing with symbols as symbols, I intentionally open up interpretation, meaning, and authorship of the works. By using symbols in this manner, I exert intentionally vague authorship over the symbols, giving little directive over how they should be read other than as symbols. Once again, this allows for sub-layers of authorship to enter the work in order to encourage a broader and more inclusive relationship to take place when presented to the public.

Symbol as represented by shape is probably the most universal use present in my work. In “This is a Pyramid”, the shape of the pyramid itself is the symbol. (Figure 3) Here, the pyramid shape is used in acknowledgement of its trans-

cultural, trans-temporal, and trans-spiritual existence as a symbol. Through the materials, scale, and exhibition, “This is a Pyramid” is intended to exist somewhere between the multitude of potential associations or symbolic values of a pyramid. Without a specific content for the pyramid to symbolize, “This is a Pyramid” points to itself as an almost homeless symbol. By avoiding giving the pyramid symbol a specific idea to associate itself with, it exists as permanently transitional- forever standing at a crossroads. By maintaining this sense of indecision for the symbol, I see a sort of infinite potential grow out of “This is a Pyramid”. This potential is a potential of authorship, of meaning, of influence, and of relationships.

In some ways, the approach I took in constructing “This is a Pyramid” is a response to the work of many artists associated with Minimalism. The connection between “This is a Pyramid” and Minimalism that I want to make goes beyond formal similarities. Where I see the closest connection is in the “theatricality” identified by Michael Fried in his essay “Art and Objecthood”. While Fried offered theatricality as a criticism of Minimalism, I openly access a similar experience. According to Fried, theatricality describes the effect created by a work of art that makes the viewer aware that they are viewing the art.<sup>10</sup> This is similar to the effect created by presenting the pyramid form in a manner that makes the audience aware that they are viewing a symbol. By presenting the pyramid form as permanently transitional within the artwork, the audience becomes aware of the fact that they are presented with a perceived incomplete set of information and are therefore made aware of their viewing of the work, or more specifically of the symbol.

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, 9th ed. (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 835-46.

The theatricality of the symbol as described in reference to “This is a Pyramid” is also present in the collection of ceramic text pieces included in “Giving the Ghost”. “A thru Z”, “This is My Hand”, “1-9”, “Parenthesis”, and “Symbol” all are constructed of ceramic text matching their titles. (Figures 8-12) In this series, symbol is in the form of letters and words. Here, the letter-symbol is presented in a similar manner to the pyramid-symbol, but the function and expectations of language are also brought forth as a result of the sparse and incomplete presentation of words and phrases. In “A thru Z” and “1-9” symbol is used in an openly self-referential manner. The “thru” and “-” of these pieces exist as symbol denoting additional sets of symbols. What I mean is that “thru” becomes symbolic of all of the alphabet except for A and Z, while the “-” symbolizes the numbers 2 through 8. These arrangements are specifically implemented to draw attention to letters and numbers as symbols- an attempt to make the audience aware of their presence rather than the almost borderless interface that can exist between letter or number sets and a literate audience.

“AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE”, by Lawrence Weiner takes a similar approach to the text object as symbol. In this piece, text reading “AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE” is applied to a building.<sup>11</sup> Here, the presence of the letters and words as symbols is made apparent to the viewer as a result of the unresolved set of information included in the phrase. By presenting a familiar phrase, Weiner opens up access to the audience, but intentionally does not deliver all of the information suggested. The audience is left with questions like “Whose eyes?” and “From what

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<sup>11</sup> Hirsch, Faye. 2008. “Where Words Go.” *Art In America* 96, no. 4: 140-178. *OmniFile Full Text Mega (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 14, 2012).

vantage point?”. This set of questions opens up multiple potential layers of authorship. As the audience interacts the work they have the opportunity to offer potential answers. The result of audience engagement with this piece is an awareness the audience as viewers of symbols.

The use of symbol in my work is intentionally open ended in regards to symbolic value. As demonstrated through “This is a Pyramid” and the ceramic text work, I use symbol as a self-referential element within the work. This “self-awareness” of the symbol is intended to have the effect of making the audience aware of their being faced with symbols- a theatricality of the symbol. By presenting symbol in this manner, not only do I intend to leave space for the authorship of the audience to enter the work, but I also aim to make the audience aware of their position in the creative process, thereby eliciting relationships.

**THE REAL IS REAL:  
NOT JUST ART**

In *Authorship of the Ghost* I identify authorship as the source of meaning in a work of art. I draw out formal approaches to authorship within my own art, supporting my perspective by also addressing the work of other artists. As a result, I identify authorship as the result of relationships between artist, audience, and material. This mode of understanding meaning is not something that I see as exclusive to works of art, instead, I see it as a reflection of patterns present in our current culture. By taking examples from politics and anthropology, I will identify instances of the relationship-based authorship in fields other than art.

**BARACK OBAMA IS  
REAL**



The birth certificate is one of several vital documents used by the United States government to keep record of the life events in a population. The birth certificate, being the first vital record kept of any individual, is a document of origin or authorship regarding that individual. The birth certificate is the document that lists the most basic facts regarding an individual's name, gender, age, citizenship, and lineage. As a vital record the birth certificate is a foundational document in our society as the basis for all future developments in that person's life. The understanding of information listed on a birth certificate even determines an individual's legitimacy as a candidate for President of the United States of America.

Starting in 2008, a group of individuals known as "Birthers" has questioned Barack Obama's status as a natural born citizen of the United States of America. While this group is undoubtedly politically motivated in their questioning of the current president's citizenship, the mistrust of his vital records offers an example of the interpretation of fact and the establishment of meaning as a relation-dependent process. By considering the birth certificate as an object of utility, Barack Obama's origin is documented as unequivocal fact in terms of the initial institutional authorship of the birth certificate. However, as an object of utility, the birth certificate is open to the injection of authorship or meaning from the position of the user of said document. As an object of utility, Barack Obama's birth certificate is involved in a development of meaning based on the relationship between a diverse nation of "users", Barack Obama himself, and the initial institutional authorship of the document. "Birthers" themselves do not single handedly establish the multi-authorial status of Barack Obama's birth certificate. It is necessary to look at the

relationship between the institutional manufacture of the birth certificate, “Birthers”, and all other popular understandings of the information represented by Barack Obama’s birth certificate. Therefore, the sources of meaning for Barack Obama’s birth certificate rely on the relationships between the institution, Barack Obama, and specifically between those who do and do not read the birth certificate as a symbol of fact. Each of these sources of authorship depends on defining themselves against the other. This process is relational in that their participation in authorship is dependant on a dialogue- a conversation between people that occurs in the space of a relationship.

Barack Obama’s birth certificate is not an artwork, however it is an instance in the current political environment that is exemplary of the relational nature of how information is interpreted in contemporary society. By writing this essay, perhaps I am applying my own layer of authorship to the president’s birth certificate. However, I am not the creator of the political climate that not only fosters alternative approaches to understanding, but also acknowledges these alternative approaches by engaging in a dialogue with a multitude of authorial sources.

# **THE VENUS OF WILLENDORF IS REAL**

The Venus of Willendorf is an anthropological artifact discovered near Vienna, Austria in 1908.<sup>12</sup> Believed to be between 20,000 and 25,000 years old, the Venus of Willendorf is a hand-carved representation of a woman's body.<sup>13</sup> As a pre-historical artifact, the Venus of Willendorf exists as a symbolic figurine open to the application of meaning through authorship in today's culture. The application of authorship to the Venus of Willendorf originates from multiple perspectives within multiple fields of study. I will point to just a few examples to demonstrate the status of this artifact as a symbol inviting authorial contribution.

In 1976, J.R. Harding published an article addressing the symbolic value of the Venus of Willendorf. Harding suggests that the figurine can be read as a depiction of a pathological disorder known as hypertrophy of the breasts.<sup>14</sup> Harding essentially diagnoses the figurine as if it were a patient in a medical office. I can only assume that Harding first studied hypertrophy of the breasts before he began to diagnose the Venus of Willendorf. In essence, Harding openly participates in the development of authorship in regards to the Venus of Willendorf. He perceives the

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<sup>12</sup> Frederick Fawcett, *The Willendorf Venus*, in the JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2787737> (accessed April 15, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> J.R. Harding, "Certain Upper Paleolithic 'venus' Statuettes Considered in Relation to the Pathological Condition Known as Massive Hypertrophy of the Breasts," *Man, New Series* 11, no. 2 (jun. 1976): 271-72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2800210> (accessed April 15, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> J.R. Harding, "Certain Upper Paleolithic 'venus' Statuettes Considered in Relation to the Pathological Condition Known as Massive Hypertrophy of the Breasts," *Man, New Series* 11, no. 2 (jun. 1976): 271-72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2800210> (accessed April 15, 2012).

figurine as a symbol, and engages in the translation of that symbol by relating his own experience to the physical characteristics of the Venus.

In “Toward Decolonizing Gender” the Venus of Willendorf is interpreted used to address the viewpoints from which history is written. Hodge McCoid and McDermott approach the interpretation of the Venus’s symbolism from a female perspective.<sup>15</sup> Their article approaches the Venus of Willendorf as an artifact created with female authorship, and as a result they present the Venus as an image of the female body created from a female perspective. They interpret the physical form of the Venus as a representation of pregnancy. Not only does this article address the physical representation of the female figure, but also the source of authorship.

The Venus of Willendorf is one of the oldest representations of the human figure known. The age status of this figurine attracts attention from a variety of fields, including art history. The widely regarded status of the Venus as a cultural symbol, combined with origins in prehistory opens up the assignment of authorship, and invites interpretation. As a result meaning comes to the Venus without excluding alternate viewpoints. The Venus of Willendorf continues to act as a cultural symbol without specific symbolic value, therefore inviting and embracing multiple sources of assigned and proposed authorships.

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine Hodge McCoid and Leroy D. McDermott, “Toward Decolonizing Gender Female Vision in the Upper Paleolithic,” *American Anthropologist* 98, no. 2 (June 1996): 319-26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/682890>. (accessed April 14, 2012).

**THE END IS REAL**

These two studies of Barack Obama's birth certificate and the Venus of Willendorf are meant to identify the methods with which I approach understanding my art not as an isolated approach to interpreting meaning, but as a reflection of how authorship and meaning is applied in the broader cultural context. I believe that my approach to understanding authorship is a learned activity, a reflection of the world around me. Authorship as described by utility, appropriation, symbol, and collaboration should not be read as a definite approach to understanding authorship, rather as an example of a method for understanding my own artistic practice within a theoretical moment.

The ideas put forth by Bourriaud figure heavily into the language and organization of ideas in this document, but were not the impetus for my thought process in creating the artwork nor my understanding of the art. Bourriaud acted as a clearly articulated approach to understanding contemporary art from which I integrated, appropriated, and reinterpreted understandings. As a sort of art-manifesto, this document is a frozen moment of time in my thoughts as an artist.





**VEHICLES OF  
AUTHORSHIP:  
HUMOR  
AND THE EVERYDAY**

My work is born out of an awareness of the formal challenges posed by the state of contemporary art. In a time when the avant-garde is no longer an issue in the creation of art, and familiar images or ideas are re-presented and re-contextualized, traditional aesthetic understandings of how meaning is created and received is no longer a comprehensive approach to understanding contemporary art. However, the mood and visual presence of contemporary art are unquestionably perceived by audiences as precursors to understanding the conceptual underpinnings of the work. The source of visual language and formal elements in my work is the result of a heightened awareness in my daily life. This awareness is filtered through a conceptual fog that blurs the everyday, obscuring normal understanding in favor of conceptual apparitions that enshroud what is thought of as known. As a result, my work is born of a library of images collected from my daily life- that which is most familiar to me. Not only do I attempt to fully engage the conceptual culture of contemporary art through the presentation of visual information from my daily experience, but I also receive the world with a tinge of humor. This humor is partially the result of my disposition, but also a response to contemporary art. I know that the question of "What can be art?" has been clearly answered with "anything" with the help of artists such as Bruce Nauman and John Baldessari- no longer leaving question as to whether or not intent is enough to determine art. The results, however, are sometimes manifested as bizarre or humorous acts that artists expect will be taken seriously by an audience. In making "My Father's Lawnmower", (Figure 13) I was fully aware of the ridiculousness of asking an audience to give serious consideration to a broken-down

lawnmower posed with a tiny plastic model of Stonehenge. I created that piece with a sense of clear conceptual intent alongside a humorous view of the world around me and also of the borderless nature of contemporary art.

The work of two artists in particular has acted as sources of inspiration for my development of a sense of humor towards the everyday and contemporary art. Both Tom Friedman and Jeff Koons have consistently made work addressing both the everyday and ideas of contemporary art with what I see as a definite sense of humor.

"Untitled" by Tom Friedman, for example, is constructed of chewed bubblegum formed into a ball and stuck to the corner of the gallery, supported only by the stickiness of the gum.<sup>16</sup> This piece, being exemplary of most of Tom Friedman's work, is delivered with a sense of humor elicited from the use of the familiar substance of bubblegum in the piece. The presentation of this piece even relies on the most known property of chewed gum- stickiness. The humorous and irreverent use of bubblegum by Friedman pokes fun at contemporary art by bringing the juvenile and disrespectful disposal of used bubblegum to the gallery wall. While "Untitled" uses garbage materials to address humor and the everyday, Jeff Koons take a different approach to similar ends.

In "Lobster", Koons presents the familiar image of a cheap inflatable toy.<sup>17</sup> Koons' humorous representation of an inflatable toy relies on the displacement of

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<sup>16</sup> Camnitzer, Luis. 2002. "Tom Friedman: the unexpected magic of craftsmanship." *Art Nexus* no. 44: 74-77. *OmniFile Full Text Mega* (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost (accessed April 14, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Wright, Karen. 2006. "Koons on Koons." *Modern Painters* 64-71. *OmniFile Full Text Mega* (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost (accessed April 14, 2012).

the image away from the beach or pool and into the art gallery. This displacement is directed back towards the contemporary art context in which “Lobster” exists by the construction and materials of the piece. Comprised mainly of detailed cast aluminum reproduction of the toy, “Lobster” fulfills the desire for craftsmanship of patrons of the arts, while simultaneously undermining the “highbrow” culture that ensconces art collectors by presenting such a pedestrian image. In effect, “Lobster” is comprised of a cartoonish representation of the everyday executed in a technical manner that laughs at the desire for material value alongside, if not over top of, a conceptual approach to art making.

The work of both Tom Friedman and Jeff Koons contain discourse between the everyday and contemporary art that I strive to include in my work. The sense of humor with which this discourse is delivered operates as simultaneously inclusive and exclusive depending on how the familiar image is received. I work in the studio with these effects in mind, trying to find objects or imagery that present themselves with a humorous or slightly deviant nature, while maintaining conceptual rigor. In my work, humor is a means to an end- a formal approach to creating works of art that has the potential of extending a hand to audience, inviting them to find their own point of entry into the work.



# FRONTIERSPACE

In the fall of 2010, Will Hutchinson and myself started an art project space in downtown Missoula, Montana called FrontierSpace. FrontierSpace featured a new exhibition Monthly from the time of its conception until current (Spring 2012). The exhibitions were mostly of artists from outside of Montana, with an encouragement from our end that the artists approach the gallery with the opportunity to experiment. Beyond that, we did not require that the artists present any specific work nor did we give them any other limitations.

FrontierSpace is physically located in two small rooms located in a private alley. The first room is approximately 10'x20' with finished gallery-style walls and lighting. The second room, 10'x10', is unfinished, feeling somewhat like a basement or coal room space. Both spaces were made available to all of the artists we hosted. While both spaces are very rudimentary without plumbing or heat, they functioned well as exhibitions spaces, drawing an attendance even in the coldest months.

My motivation for getting involved in this type of project was twofold. First, I had, and continue to have, an interest in participating in the art community wherever I live, this being a constant thread in my life for the past several years spanning several states and cities. The second motivation I had in participating in FrontierSpace was an interest in curation as an artistic practice. This interest stems from my time working as gallery preparator at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Art in Grand Rapids, Michigan and from the more general approach that I take to art making. These dual interests gave me an approach to FrontierSpace that went beyond a simple desire to operate a gallery. As a result, the way in which FrontierSpace operated is similar to an alternative exhibition space,

but without a specific end goal of selling work or any other exchange beyond hosting interactions.

Looking back on the series of exhibitions we hosted at FrontierSpace, I can identify varying levels of success from show to show. This judgment of success comes as a retrospective assessment. As stated, the goals and guidelines for FrontierSpace remained loosely defined throughout the project. This is also exemplary of how I have approached much of my art making. For me, this functions as a specific approach to authorship and intent.

One of the most successful shows at FrontierSpace was the January 2011 exhibition of Alex Gartelmann and Jonas Sebura. My judgment of success is the result of two specific facts about this show in particular. First of all, Gartelmann and Sebura collaborated through the exhibition for the first time. This was an experiment for the both of them. Not only did they merge their practices for the first time, but they also did so in a city that neither of them had visited before. Despite the fact that neither of them had actually seen FrontierSpace before exhibiting there, Gartelmann and Sebura worked together to create an exhibition that dealt directly with the physical space of the gallery. With the help of dimensions of the space, they designed a sculpture that was essentially built into the room. (Figure 14) Also, they created a series of light boxes that were exhibited in the rougher of the two rooms, accommodating the lack of actual lighting in the space. (Figure 15) All of these factors are bolstered by their ongoing active exhibition schedule as a collaborative in the eastern half of the United States. I don't pretend to claim authorship over their collaboration, but I do credit FrontierSpace



with providing them a starting point for something that continues well beyond the walls of the gallery or the objects presented within. The social bond that was in some ways fostered between Sebura and Gartelmann is the most important result of the exhibition from my vantage point.

A second example of what I consider success resulting from FrontierSpace was the December 2009 exhibition of Israel Davis. While Israel's show was mostly preconceived and then retrofit into the exhibition space, it was events that followed that hold value. Following Israel's exhibition at FrontierSpace, he was invited to show his work at the Gallery of Visual Arts on the campus of the University of Montana. The gallery director saw Israel's show at FrontierSpace and approached him with this opportunity. The resulting exhibition took place in what I consider to be a more conducive environment for Israel's body of work. I make this statement in regards to the more formal atmosphere of the Gallery of Visual arts as compared to FrontierSpace and also in regards to the amount of physical space allowed for exhibition. In this instance, FrontierSpace acted as a conduit between artist and gallery, between artist and audience, beyond simple exhibition.

In both of these instances, FrontierSpace hosted an experience for patrons attending the exhibitions and for the exhibiting artists after the fact. I do not mean to suggest that FrontierSpace, Will Hutchinson, or myself should claim authorship for what transpired in the careers of Israel Davis, Alex Gartelmann, or Jonas Sebura. Instead, I see FrontierSpace as an arena for unpredictable social experiences- something beyond just a place to see art. It is within this frame of thought that I now see connections between what has happened through FrontierSpace, and the

ideas articulated by Nicholas Bourriaud in his book Relational Aesthetics. In that book, Bourriaud describes what he sees as a cohesive approach to art making by artists working from the 1990's until present.<sup>18</sup> I did not initially think of FrontierSpace as a two yearlong social experiment at its conception, but rather an alternative exhibition space. Looking back, as stated, I do not place utmost importance on the “quality” of the work exhibited, or the social capital gained by myself from such a venture. Instead, I see FrontierSpace as a conduit, a lubricant, or an arena for exchange.

FrontierSpace initially existed as only an exhibition space in a fixed physical location. As the project progressed and developed its own identity, we began to rethink what FrontierSpace was and could be. As a result, Will Hutchinson and myself adopted FrontierSpace as a collaborative moniker for ourselves. Maybe this was an attempt to claim responsibility for what happened in the venue, but I like to think of it as something more.

The re-thinking of FrontierSpace as something more than a venue was born of the fact that the project was linked to a physical location and, essentially to a specific time span. In recognizing the potential to facilitate social experience through continued interaction between artists or between artists and audience, the physical form of the collaboration was re-invented as portable. The current project underway involves a 1967 Aristocrat Land Commander 16' travel trailer reworked as a multi-use space, imitating the interior of a gallery. This project, titled “FRNTI3R” (in reference to the license plate issued to the trailer) is still in the early

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<sup>18</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (n.p.: Les Presses du Reel, 2002).

phases of definition. As of this writing, FRNTI3R has been realized in exhibition twice. Both instances have presented the trailer both as a sculptural object and a space or venue.

The trailer itself shows modest changes to the interior with an unchanged exterior. I initially thought of the trailer as being in conversation with “Trailer Queen”, and still do. (Figure 1) But, the changes that were enacted on the trailer were much less dramatic than those that happened to the lawnmower in “Trailer Queen”. The decision to enact modest changes on the trailer was in anticipation of a variety of uses. FRNTI3R is meant to have the potential to exist as an exhibition venue, a sculptural object, and also as material for future generations of the project.

The first use of the trailer occurred on the campus of the University of Montana in conjunction with “Giving the Ghost”, an exhibition in the Gallery of Visual Arts. FRNTI3R was parked in the middle of the University campus, outside of the gallery. In anticipation of the opening reception for the thesis exhibition of Will Hutchinson and myself, FRNTI3R was used as a base for activity in reference to tailgating a sports event. In the hours leading up to the opening reception, Will Hutchinson and myself grilled food in front of the trailer and handed it out to anyone who asked. This activity functioned as an opportunity for public engagement and also had the un-intended effect of funneling the community into the exhibition. We did not hand out food with the idea of encouraging gallery attendance, but in explaining our actions to the people we were feeding, they expressed their interest often times by viewing the exhibition. In this instance,

FRNTI3R existed as a sculptural object on the campus, as well as a backdrop for our activities leading up to and during the opening reception.

The second exhibition of FRNTI3R happened during the 2012 NCECA Conference in Seattle, Washington. During this event, FRNTI3R was included in an outdoor sculpture exhibition on a Pier in Puget Sound. In this instance, the trailer itself had a strong sculptural presence, however it was used as a home for other activities. On arriving to the exhibition, we used the trailer as a sort of studio for the production of 40 small Styrofoam pyramids. These pyramids were constructed onsite and placed around the trailer as a sort of “sculpture garden” or yard. (Figure 16) After the pyramids were completed, the interior of the trailer was converted to and used as an office for the production of a short-run periodical. This periodical, presented in the form of a physical and online newspaper, included the writings of six different artists on topics relating to art and art criticism. Many of the articles were directly addressing topics specific to ceramics, but others were simply evidence from other projects completed by the authors. The periodical, titled “FRNTI3R N3WS”, was distributed in physical form with the use of a newspaper vending machine placed outside of the trailer. This iteration of FRNTI3R mixed production with art object in a way that kept the project awake and active throughout the exhibition, thus challenging the expectation that the project reach a plateau of “finish” at, during, or before the start of the show. While this show marked the finishing of another phase of FRNTI3R, it now exists as another instance of FRNTI3R reacting to the expectations inherent in its temporary location.

As it now stands, FrontierSpace will continue to exist as the moniker under which Will Hutchinson and myself will continue to execute collaborative projects whenever possible. The physical exhibition venue in Missoula is scheduled to lose the name of FrontierSpace in June of 2012. The gallery may or may not continue to exist as such, but we intend to continue the effort through FRNTI3R or other iterations in the future.

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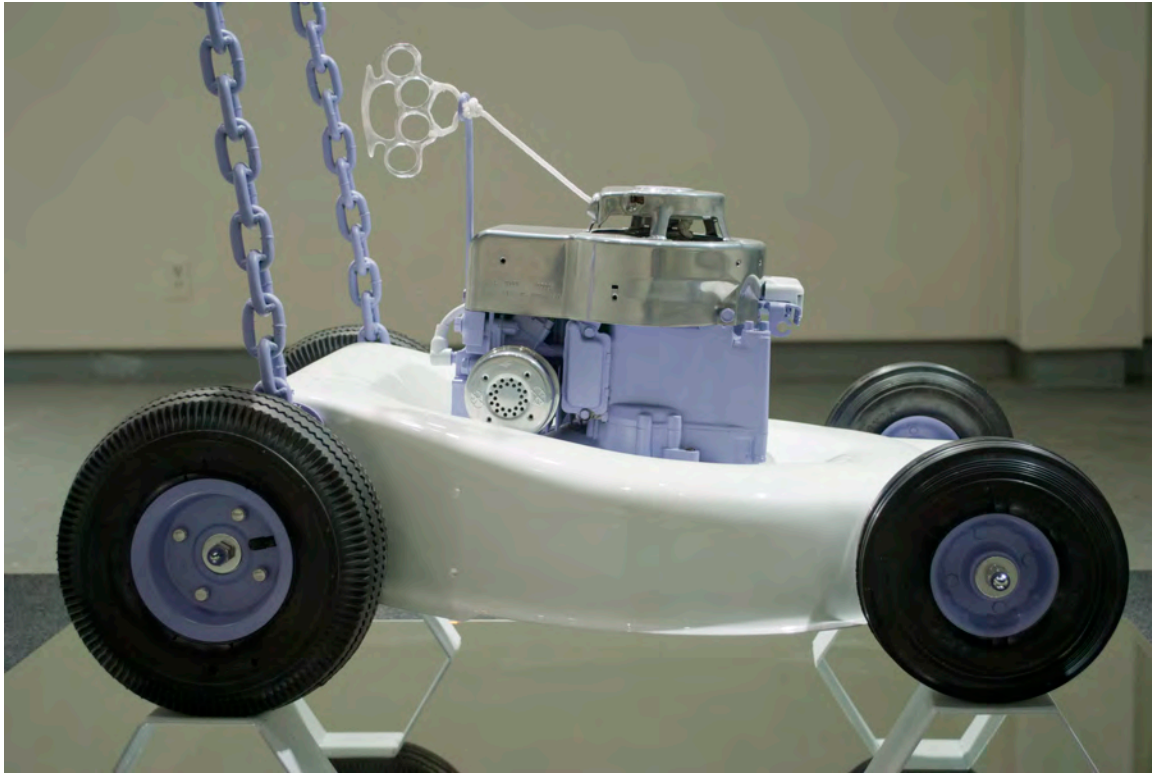
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**Figure 1:** *Trailer Queen* Customized Lawnmower, display. 4'x6'x4' 2010-2011





**Figure 2:** *Entertainment Center*, Wood, stereos, extension cords. 12'x6'x6'. 2012

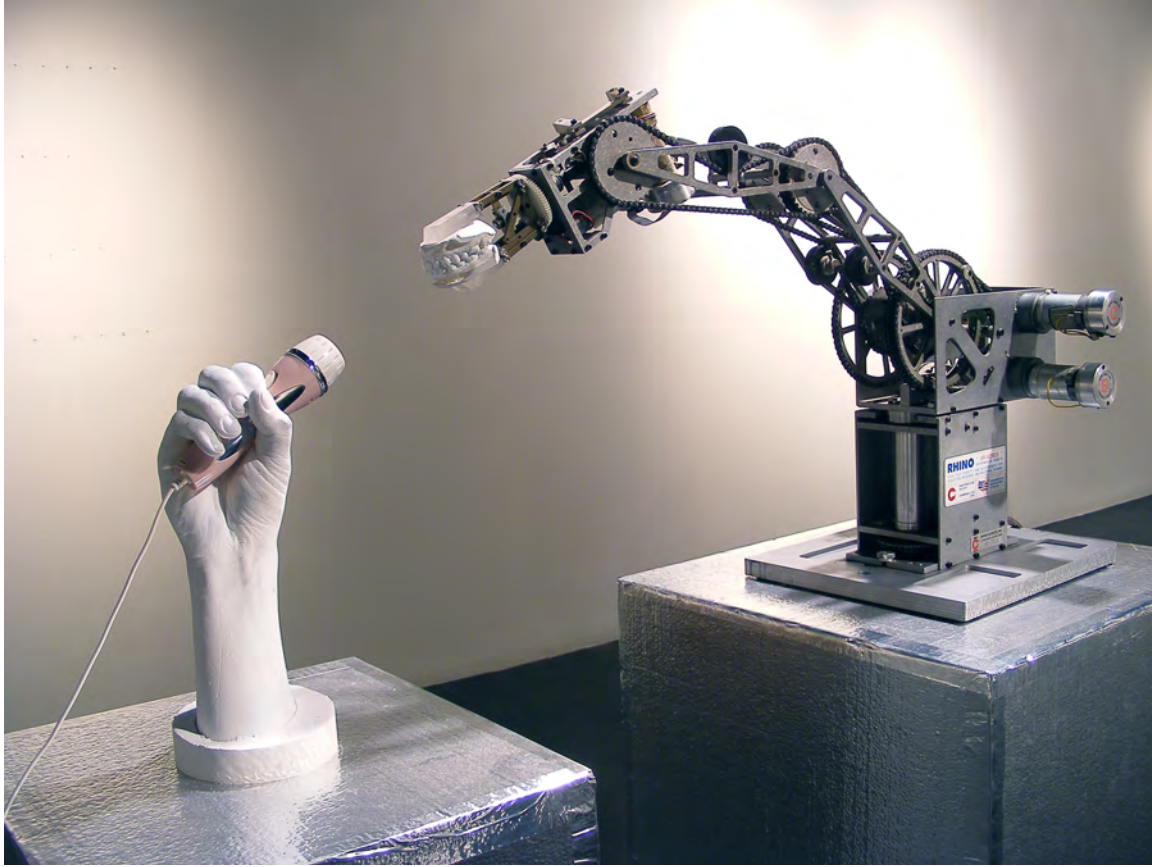


**Figure 3:** *This is a Pyramid*, Styrofoam sheet, tape. 9'x9'x15' 2012



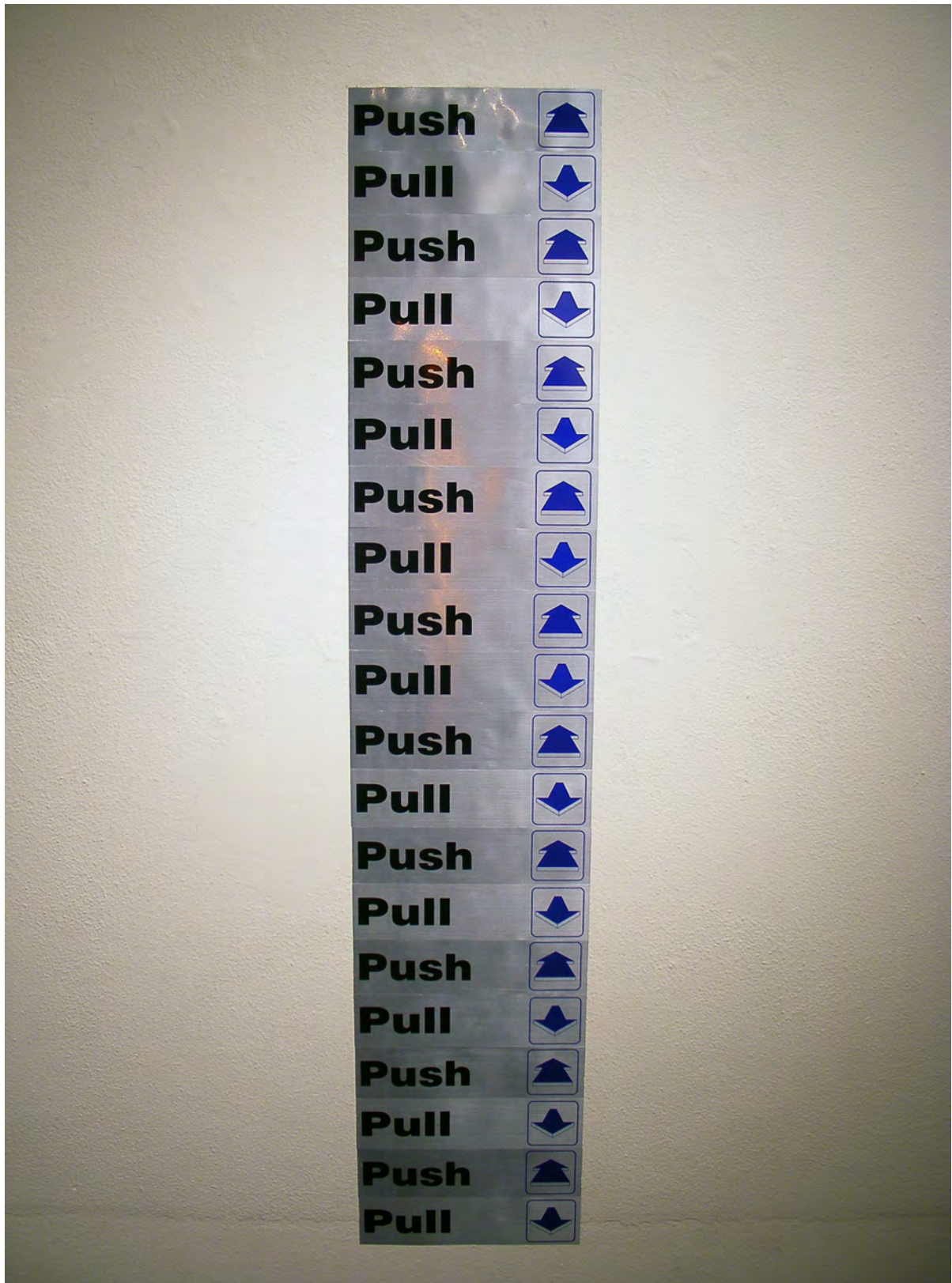


**Figure 4:** *"Giving the Ghost" (Installation View) 2012*



**Figure 5:** *This is Also My Hand*, Styrofoam, plaster, microphone, robot. 5'x5'x5'.  
2012





**Figure 6:** *Push/Pull*, Decals, dimensions variable. 2012





**Figure 7:** *The Real is Real*, Cut Vinyl, Dimensions Variable 2012





**Figure 8:** *This is My Hand*, Ceramic, dimensions variable, 2012



**Figure 9:** *A Thru Z*, Ceramic, Dimensions Variable, 2012





**Figure 10:** 1-9, Ceramic. Dimensions Variable 2012



**Figure 11:** *Parenthesis*, Ceramic, Dimensions Variable. 2012



**Figure 12:** *Symbol*, Ceramic, Dimensions Variable. 2012

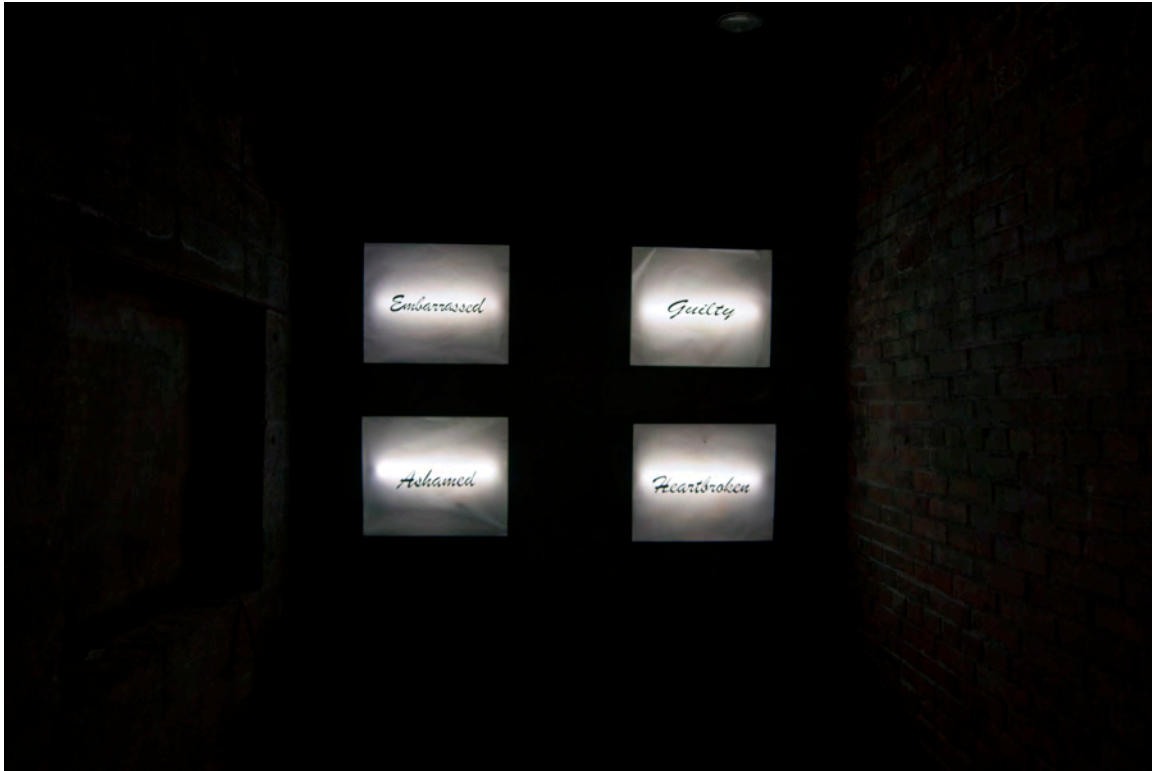


**Figure 13:** *My Father's Lawnmower*, Lawnmower, model of Stonehenge, plinth. 4'x6'x4'. 2010



**Figure 14:** *FrontierSpace* (Installation of the work of Jonas Sebura and Alex Gartelmann) 2010-2011





**Figure 15:** *FrontierSpace* (Installation view of the work of Jonas Sebura and Alex Gartelmann) 2010-2011



**Figure 16:** *FRNTI3R*, Travel Trailer, Styrofoam, mixed media. 2012